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## Turkey's Domestic Affairs

### Shaping the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Partnership

by Judith S. Yaphe

#### Conclusions

- The resignation in June of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, leader of the Islamist Refah Party-and the collapse of the government he headed with Deputy Prime Minister Tansu Ciller-ended, at least for the moment, the confrontation between the Islamists and the Turkish General Staff, avowed guardians of the secular legacy of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. However, the conflict could resurface because the differences between the two are deepseated-involving Turkish national identity, political philosophy, social policy, security, and foreign relations.
- The generals would like to eliminate the Islamists from government permanently and maintain their own influence in determining state policies. Particularly contentious in the recent crisis were the military's unilateral declaration in late April that the "internal" threat to security was more serious than external threats, and their pursuit of military and security cooperation with Israel.
- The political crisis has polarized public opinion, pitting those determined to preserve secular values in Turkey against the Islamists, who claim to represent the "true" Turkey. The ultimate outcome of the crisis is unclear-the new Prime Minister, Mesut Yilmaz, has promised elections at a date yet to be determined. The Islamists could return to power if they maintain their 20 percent of the vote and the rightist and centrist parties remain riven by corruption, factionalism, and weakened leadership.
- Whatever the result, the crisis will have profound implications for the strategic relationship with the United States. The Turkish General Staff will expect U.S. support, and it is unlikely to heed warnings that its actions place Turkey's fragile democracy at risk.

#### Background

The collapse of Turkey's Islamist government was precipitated in February when the generals on the National Security Council presented 18 proposals which, if passed, would have ended changes in education and other issues proposed by the Islamists in the government. Over the spring, the crisis escalated as the generals unilaterally declared "internal" problems (read Islamist activists) to be the key security threat to Turkey rather than external ones (Kurdish separatists led by the anti-Ankara Kurdish Workers Party or PKK, and its Syrian sponsors). The generals also demanded the introduction of eight-years compulsory secular education and the closure of religious schools, and expanded

military-security agreements with Israel. In late May they announced a purge of pro-Islamist military officers; the purge was approved by then-Prime Minister Erbakan.

The issues reveal the nature of the struggle between the general staff, backed by the majority of Turks who are secularists, and the Islamist government led by Erbakan and supported by an increasingly vocal and growing minority of religious activists. They also reflect the nature of modern Turkish society as it gropes for a synthesis between the western-oriented secularism of Ataturk and re-emerging Muslim neo-Ottoman traditions.

In the long centuries of Turkish rule in what was an empire and what is now a state, the changes wrought by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s may have been atypical. Ataturk westernized the alphabet, dress, and legal codes, and brought a powerful religious institution under state control, but he did not alter the core religious beliefs and practices of many Turks. As one scholar describes it, Ataturk left untouched local folk religion, the religion of the villages, and it is that pattern of religious practices that the new generation of urban immigrants has brought to the cities, including Ankara and Istanbul. Some outside experts at the INSS roundtable believe the general staff may represent an outmoded or anachronistic ideal of secularism in a society that wants to return to more traditional values and customs. This comes at a time of deepening corruption of the traditional rightist and centrist secular political parties—a corruption that has tainted Tansu Ciller in particular, but not the Islamists in general or the military. Ciller was accused of personally benefitting from financial dealings while serving as prime minister. Critics charge she opted to join rival Erbakan in a coalition government to avoid trial on corruption charges. Now that she is out of government she may face prosecution.

### **The Domestic Crisis Deepens**

The conflict between the generals and the Islamist government polarized Turkish society. Secular factions long at odds—owners and labor unions, elements of the press, and other segments of secular, urban-based Turkish society once in conflict—came together to confront the growing popularity of the Islamists and oppose their efforts to re-impose Islamist education, dress codes, and values on society at large. The generals' efforts to stop Islamist-proposed changes in education by closing religious schools (*imam-hatip* schools for religious training) and introducing eight years of compulsory state education rallied support around the Islamist Refah Party rather than diminishing it.

Many observers and analysts regard the military's efforts to set the domestic and foreign policy agendas as heavy-handed and out of touch with Turkish reality. The generals' April declaration on the internal security threat was almost certainly more a public relations campaign than reality, according to many observers. It is contradicted by popular perception, by the generals' repeated condemnations of Tehran and Damascus for supporting PKK terrorism, and the large-scale cross-border operation launched in May into northern Iraq. As many as 1,800 PKK Kurdish separatists have been killed and 30,000 Turkish troops involved in the operation, according to press sources.

The military's expanded alliance with Israel, without the apparent consent of the civilian government, only further exacerbated the tensions between military and civilian officials. In the past several months, members of the Turkish General Staff and senior Israeli officials have exchanged highly visible visits. The Turkish and Israeli military conduct joint training exercises and share intelligence. Israel is upgrading Turkish F-4 aircraft with Popeye I air-to-ground missiles and agreed, in May, to co-produce the Popeye II—deals worth an estimated \$700 million according to Israeli press sources. Plans for joint naval maneuvers with Israeli, Turkish, and U.S. forces were announced during the visit to Jerusalem of the Turkish Deputy Chief of Staff in May.

The Islamists, in contrast, looked increasingly to the Muslim states for economic and security assistance. Although his stated intentions were not to replace NATO membership or hoped-for participation in the European Union (EU), Erbakan visited Libya and Iran soon after taking office, concluded an agreement to purchase Iranian gas, and was instrumental in creating the so-called Developing-8-whose members include: Egypt, Libya, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Turkey. Erbakan denounced Israel and joined with Saudi Arabia and other Muslim states and organizations in opposing the peace process. He tried to cancel the military's joint exercises with Israel planned for this summer but the generals insisted that they will proceed.

### **Is Coup By Stealth the Military's Only Recourse?**

Turkey's generals were able to engineer change by pressing the Prime Minister to resign and pressuring President Demirel to appoint a new Cabinet. In the coming months, the generals will have additional choices:

- They could suggest to President Demirel and the new civilian government that Islamists not be allowed to participate in any future government;
- If Demirel proves unable to keep the new government on a controlled course, they could again seek the Cabinet's resignation;
- They could stage a takeover, as they did in the 1960s, 1970s, and in 1980.

The generals engaged in direct intervention in the Turkish political process to remove Erbakan and Ciller from office but, unlike previous "interventions" in the 1960s, 70s, and in 1980, this one may have lacked as broad a consensus and may underscore how illusory Ataturk's reforms are for a growing number of Turks. Over the next several months, the government may change several times, elections may be called for, and, in a worst case scenario, the military may attempt to stage a coup. Some analysts believe that the General Staff is trying to replace coup rumors with a plan of action for President Demirel and the democratic, secular forces to "do the right thing." In this case, an alternative solution-an interim technocratic government-may be a possibility.

Specialists on Turkey will debate the implications on this confrontation for Turkey's political future:

- Some scholars argue that the Refah-led government should have been allowed to run its natural course and fail, just as the secular parties had done. The "natural" demise of the Islamist party would have been a safer end than one forced by military intervention because it would leave few martyrs and fewer illusions.
- Other observers think military intervention helps resolve unresolvable political crises. They note that the military would not abrogate the constitution by staging a coup. The military, however, designed the constitution-written two years after their 1980 takeover-to ensure their right to intervene when necessary.
- None seems to believe that adoption of the French two-stage election model (which was fatal to the Algerian electoral process in 1991) would provide a solution or ease the way to eliminating future similar crises.

### Contrasting Turkey's Islamists and Its Generals

| <u>Issue</u>                      | <u>The Islamists</u>  | <u>The Generals</u>  |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>National identity</b>          | New Ottomans; Muslim first, then Turk.  | Preservers of Atatürkism; Turks first, European second then Muslim.  |
| <b>Government</b>                 | Democratic state based on Islam and shariat law; profess belief in separation of religion and the state.  | Secularism with strong state control of religion.  |
| <b>Foreign Policy</b>             | Economic and security ties with Muslim states (Iran, Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, Malaysia, Libya, Indonesia); oppose Arab-Israeli peace process; play on growing popular resentment of exclusion from EU. | Agreements with Israel on training, intelligence, air joint exercises; accuse Iran, Syria of supporting PKK; favor close ties with U.S., cooperation with NATO, EU.                |
| <b>Social Issues</b>              | Reintroduce dress codes, expand religious schools, build mosques in secular centers of Ankara and Istanbul.   | Oppose any encroachment of religion into public life; enforcing secular dress and social codes and eight compulsory secular education with religious schools for training clerics. |
| <b>Threat Perception</b>          | PKK terrorism, western culture  | Claim internal (Islamists) threat more serious than external.  |
| <b>U.S. Security Relationship</b> | Oppose economic sanctions on Iraq and isolation of Iran; have muted long-time opposition to U.S., NATO military ties.   | Favor strong political and military ties to the United States; misgivings on U.S. policy toward Iraq, Iran, perceive embargo.  |

### Implications for the United States

The outcome of the current political struggle in Turkey is uncertain. Prime Minister Yılmaz has promised elections, possibly next spring, to return a new, four-year government to power. Islamists still sit in parliament and their local organizations-the key to their electoral victories-are apparently intact. If they were to receive 20 percent of the vote, as they have in the past two elections, and the rightist, centrist parties remain divided by a weak leadership, allegations of corruption, and factionalism, then the stage could be set for a repeat of this year's confrontation.

However it is resolved, it will have implications for Turkey's strategic relationship with the United States. The Turkish military places great importance on its role in NATO and especially on its bilateral ties to the United States. But, there is also a growing sense in Turkey that the United States may be an unreliable ally-the General Staff has been unhappy over long-standing arms procurement problems and sees what it perceives to be an arms embargo as a major impediment to relations. It does not share the somewhat relaxed attitude the United States seems to have regarding Russia in the Caucasus or Syria. American and European criticisms of the lack of human rights, especially regarding the Kurds, are irritants and ignored. The General Staff may anticipate that its new relationship with Israel will give it a new source of advanced weaponry as well as leverage, or at least a new ally, to intercede in Washington on its behalf.

If the Turkish General Staff continues its pattern of intervening in the political process, it will expect U.S. support; the generals are unlikely to heed warnings that their actions place Turkey's fragile democracy at risk. The generals interpret comments, by senior U.S. administration spokesmen, on Turkey as a secular state as supporting their course of action. The Turkish generals probably perceive the strategic relationship-already tense over Ankara's budding relations with Tehran and Baghdad-to be going through a temporary phase, one which is bound to improve because of Turkey's geostrategic

importance.

#### Recommendations

- ***The United States needs to restore a sense of trust with the Turkish military without sending misleading signals.*** U.S. officials in Washington should consult more regularly with senior Turkish military and civilian leaders on issues of common concern, especially if shifts in U.S. policy perspectives are involved. Participation in confidence building exercises and contacts between mid-level officers, officials, and academics in Turkey and the United States could also be expanded.
- ***The Turkish military needs to know that while the U.S. government supports a secular Turkey, the United States and Western Europe would not support a military coup, and that such a coup would undercut Turkish efforts at further European integration.*** Efforts by the military to ban the Refah Party entirely or to deny Islamist delegates seats in parliament would weaken Turkey's democratic image.

The U.S.-Turkish strategic relationship was the topic of a roundtable of specialists held at National Defense University in May 1997. This Strategic Forum should be read in conjunction with "Turkey's International Affairs: Shaping the U.S.-Turkey Strategic Partnership" Strategic Forum #122, July 1997, by Dr. Sean Kay and Judith Yaphe. Dr. Yaphe is an INSS Senior Fellow. She can be reached at (202)685-2224 or yaphej@ndu.edu.

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